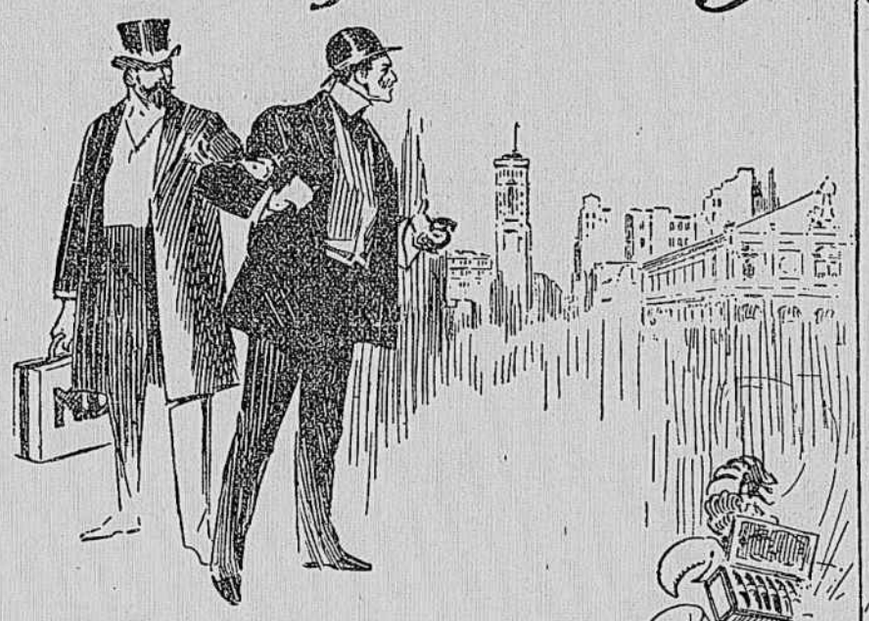
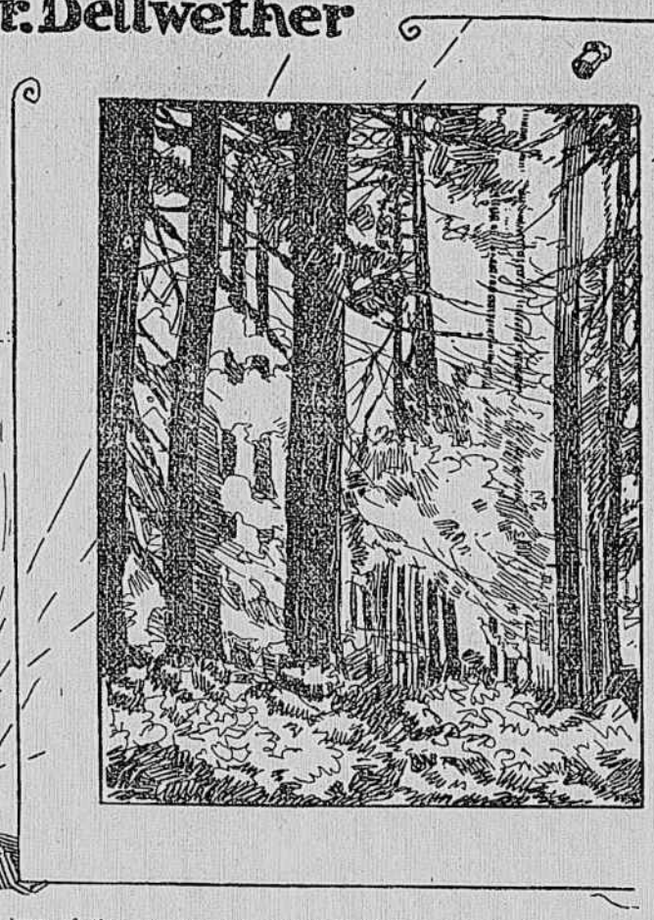
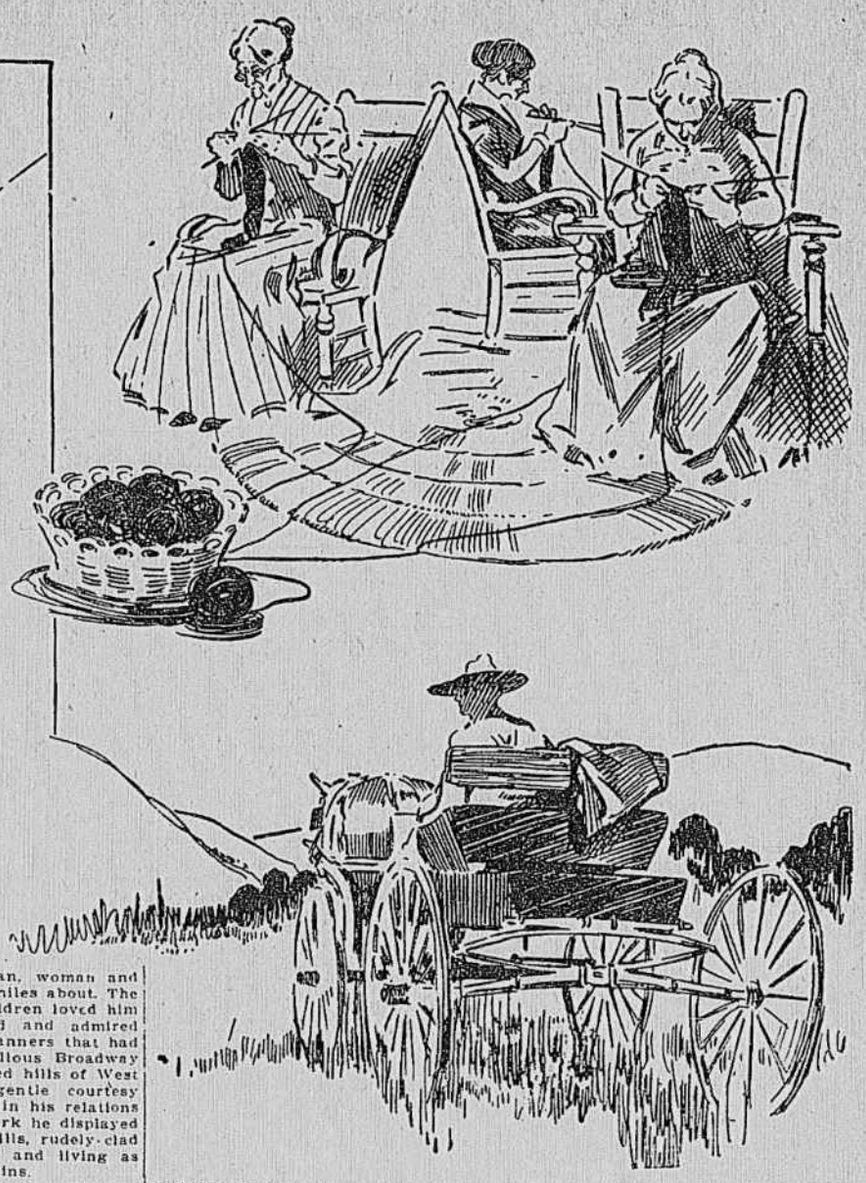
REAL ROMANCES OF THE BUSINESS WORLD

The Transformation of Mr. Bellwether of Broadway







BY RICHARD SPILLANE.

To Mr. Bellwether the earth was bounded on the north, east, south and west by Broadway, and the day began when the sun went down. For men in trade he had a general tolerance. They were necessary, perhaps, in the scheme of things as were waiters and scullery maids, but they were not half so important as the event of a new comic opera or a change in styles of dress. Upon the selection of his cravats, his shirts, his hats, his waistcoats, his shoes, his socks he gave an earnestness of attention second only to the weave and the shades of the cloth in trousers or coat, the roll of the coat collar, the notch in the lapel, the flare of the hips and the nice sense of proportion and the fit of every garment that graced his person. He was a sartorial delight and a terror to and yet the delight of his tailor. He gave an air of distinction to everything he wore. Those who tried to copy him could never understand how the harmoney that seemed to be a part of his dress always was lacking in what they wore.

No one knew better how to select an entree, how to prepare the daintiest of salads, what rare vintage of Moselle or champagne would lend itself best to delight the palate with this or that bird. Chefs never trusted his orders to underlings, but bended all their energies and exercised all their arts to win his approval. A word of praise from him was a treasure. To fail to meet his most exacting demands was a reproach.

Mr. Bellwether was neither a prig nor a plutocrat. He paid well for good goods and good service, but never was lavish. Waiters were more attentive to him than to more generous patrons and crefs got far larger gratuities from others whose desires they were less anxious to meet. It was so, too, with men and women. To be numbered among Bellwether's friends was an end many sought to attain; to be his guest at one of his charming dinings with a joy. The fine discrimination Mr. Bellwether evidenced in sartorial and culinary affairs he employed in choosing his associates. There were a few clever people of the stage, a few writers, a few artists, a few men about town, and a few rich men who were his intimate friends. These found him bright, witty and most gracious, but outside of his own exclusive set men and women gave little credit to him for brains and much for that indescribable quality that is a combination of class and ton.

Apparently unconscious or indifferent to how he was viewed by his fellow creatures, Mr. Bellwether went serenely along his pleasant course through life. Each of his days was well ordered. From habit or duty he appeared at least once in the twenty-four hours at his club to breakfast or get his mail or write his letters. Occasionally he went forth to his tailor's, his harberdasher's or his hatter's, to look over their productions or give directions for some novelty he had in view. Occasionally he sauntered up the avenue, but he cared little for promenading. It was not until night fell that he took a real interest in things.

For the serious in theatricals he had little patience. He liked the gay sparkling and tuneful. For one dashing song, one pretty scene or one fine bit of dialogue he would visit a show again and again. Some nights he would drop into a half a dozen theatres in the course of the evening. Rarely, except the first night, would he sit in a performance. He wanted only that which suited him most. Occasionally, just to add spice to life, he gambled a little. If he won he was extravagant in the masses of roses he sent to some footlight favorite, and more than one so honored thought she had captivated the elegant Mr. Bellwether. If he lost he forgot the fact, or, at least, seemed to forget it. After the theatre Mr. Bellwether usually had two or three congenial persons at table with him. How long he remained depended largely on his mood or theirs, but when he or they tired of one resort they wandered to another. There was no thought of going homeward while there were other places to go.

It was a surprise and a shock to Mr. Bellwether when, bothered somewhat by an obstinate cough, a physician told him his condition was serious and he would have to get out of New York and stay out.

The physician was brutally frank. "You've wrecked your constitution," he said. "For years you have taken no exercise, turned night into day, poured enough liquor into your stomach to float a ship and violated all laws of health while you have dawdled and idled away what should have been the best years of your life. Now you have tuberculosis. Go into the mountains and live an outdoor life and have a chance, but only a slim one. Continue your present mode of existence a few more weeks and you'll be dead within six months."

Mr. Bellwether had serious thoughts that night of blowing out his brains, but in the morning he and his valet were northward bound and the few persons who received notes from him knew nothing about him except what he said: that he had been compelled to leave town suddenly and might be absent quite a time.

Broadway missed him at first and then forgot him. Nobody is remembered long by Broadway, but Mr. Bellwether did not forget. It was frightfully dreary for him in the hotel in the Adirondacks to which he had gone. He lacked the frivolity he craved, the companionship to which he had been accustomed and the pleasures which had become second nature to him.

He tried to find subjects to divert his mind from his dread illness and he endeavored to school himself to outdoor occupations, but it was hard. It was difficult, too, to sleep at night after years of sleeping in daylight. A month of the monotony of the hotel with only invalids for companions drove him to desperation. More to take his thoughts out of the channel into which they were drawn constantly than with ideas of profit he began to speculate. He had plenty of money, so he determined to risk a trifle in Wall Street. He was delighted to find this stimulating. He stopped brooding and developed a lively interest in all the news and gossip of The Street. As his interest grew so did the size of his ventures. The telegraph office in the hotel never did a larger business than at that time, but one day there was a halt. He was caught in one of the convulsions of the market and nearly all of his fortune wiped out.

Mr. Bellwether did not whimper or whine. He was too much of a thoroughbred for that. It rather surprised him to discover that with fortune gone and health shattered he was more eager for life than he ever had been before. He could not continue his present expensive method of living, so he dismissed his valet, paid his reckoning and moved on. A week later a man of elegant appearance but delicate looking engaged quarters in an apology for a hotel in a village high up in the Blue Ridge Mountains in West Virginia. The people were astonished at the number of trunks the stranger had and gossiped a good deal about him, but soon they became accustomed to him and then, good naturedly, did what they could for his well-being. They never knew that he suffered.

There was not a bathtub in the village, and to Mr. Bellwether a daily bath was a religion. They knew nothing of what it means to a man to suddenly have to look after his own affairs when he has been accustomed all his life to have a valet attend to every detail. When the first night of his residence in the village he went to dinner in evening dress there was a sensation, but Mr. Bellwether had done this from habit and did not repeat the offense. It was hard at first to eat the coarse fare of the village inn, especially to one of such sensitive taste, delicate appetite and fine sense of the exquisite in foodstuffs, but man is adaptable.

Faithfully and conscientiously Mr. Bellwether went forth every day to trudge about the hills and breathe into his poor, weakened lungs the pure, balsamic air that would repair in part the damage done to them. In time he got to know every man, woman and child for half a dozen miles about. The men liked him, the children loved him and the women pitted and admired him. The same fine manners that had won the respect of callous Broadway he showed in the rugged hills of West Virginia. The same gentle courtesy that distinguished him in his relations with women in New York he displayed to the women in the hills, rudely-clad though they might be and living as most of them do in cabins.

Simply as he lived and modest as were his expenses Bellwether began to fear about the future. For the first time he found it necessary to give serious thought to earning a living. There was no employment about the village to which he could turn. In fact, any employment in the village would be unwise for him to take, for constant outdoor life meant everything to him. He studied the problem long and hard, and it was a month or more before the idea came to him that proved an inspiration. And when it came he laughed as he had not laughed in years.

In all the mountain homes to which his wanderings from the village took him he had found the women folk engaged every spare hour in one form of employment—knitting. They knitted socks, mittens, caps and knicknacks for their rude homes. The yarns they used were coarse, but the goods they turned out would wear long and well. Mr. Bellwether, who never had done a stroke of work, determined to go into the business of buying and selling socks, and when he thought of what Broadway would say if the people there knew about it he laughed again.

Once the idea had taken possession of him Mr. Bellwether lost no time in carrying it into effect. He purchased a serviceable horse and buggy for a small sum, after having journeyed to the nearest town of fair size, and entered into a dead with several storekeepers there to sell the stuff on commission. Previously he had spread the news throughout the neighborhood of his village that he would buy for cash all the socks the women would knit. Cash is a potent argument in the mountains of West Virginia, where people go sometimes for months without sight of one of Uncle Sam's silver tokens or paper bills. To them the small sum Bellweiher offered seemed large, and they wondered how he could afford to pay so much. He, aroused more by the few dollars at stake and more keenly interested then he had been in anything in all the years he was along Broadway, started on his first trip with a thrill and a hope that were new to him.

There were two dozen pairs in the first lot Bellwether delivered to the storekeepers, and their sale meant a gross profit of only a little more than 50 cents to him. In fact, there was loss in the deal when the feed of the horse, the wear and tear and the time were considered. And then, too, there was the additional item that the storekeepers took no risk and only paid Bellwether after they had sold the goods. But Bellwether was elated. He was doing something. He was striving at least to earn his bread and salt.

The second week Mr. Bellwether had more than two dozen pairs to take to town. The wonderful news that the sick gentleman would pay money—real money—for their knit goods began to spread. Women and girls were eager to knit now, for that potent thing money would bring to them luxuries they never had been able to obtain, and which they had longed to possess. It meant bright ribbons, gimcracks, maybe dresses and other pretty things women love.

Bellwether, on his second trip, was delighted to learn the storekeepers were finding a sale for the knitted socks. No wonder. The price was low and the material most serviceable if it was rough. The storekeepers assured him there was a market for all he could furnish.

It was nearly three months before Bellwether began to see any real profit. By that time he had to travel as far afield as twenty miles from the village to reach some of the people who were knitting for him. Every day he was on the road. He was getting fresh air aplenty. No one was a more welcome visitor than he. Better far than the knowledge that the business now was bringing a profit above all expenses was the realization that he was getting stronger. He had been prudent in making provision against changes in the weather. Rain had no terror for him, nor cold, either. More than once he was thankful for the wonderful lot of wearing apparel he had accumulated in his Broadway days, and which his valet had packed away in that squadron of trunks.

For nearly a year and a half Bellwether continued his tours of the mountain country and his trips to the town. The first year netted him $244. He made almost as much in the first half of the second year, but by this time he was restless. It was apparent to him that he had about reached the limit of possibility within the narrow field in which he was engaged. It taxed his utmost energy to cover the district within the mountain territory he could connect with. Some of his people sent their product to him because he could not make the rounds. In addition, he knew he now was supplying nearly all the knit socks the town would buy. More than anything else he knew that if he ever was to make enough money to secure himself against need he never could make it out of a hand-made product that came into competition with machinery. He had become ambitious. The business blood of his ancestors was stirring within him.

A man of polish and refinement claims attention anywhere. Not a few persons in addition to the storekeepers came to know and admire the cultivated and elegant gentleman who brought the town's supply of knit socks down from the hill country. They respected him for the brave fight he was making against a dread disease. One of the men who came to know Bellwether was a banker. It is a banker's business to talk about business. Bellwether told him frankly in answer to any inquiry that about $500 a year was all he possibly could make as he was situated, but he told the banker there were excellent possibilities for profit if a factory for making socks was established in the town. Labor was plentiful, fuel was cheap, there were good railroad connections, and if there was any staple article of wear it certainly was the sock. Then he gave some facts and figures about the cost of production which he had collected.

"Well," said the banker, "why don't you go into it?"

"Because," replied Bellwether, "I haven't enough money."

"But you have credit," rejoined the banker.

"With whom?" asked Bellwether.

"With me," the banker replied.

There was a factory started in that town within seven months. It was small, but the machinery was first-class, the management was good and the operatives capable. A few skilled workers from a New Jersey town had to be imported. That was all. His life in the hills had strengthened Bellwether wonderfully and had sharpened his wits. He still continued the old business, but used a young man to make the rounds in his stead. At regular intervals he took a short vacation and went back into the mountains, for he meant to take no chances with his health. Mr. Bellwether had every incentive for safeguarding his precious health now, for he not only was making money, but he had fallen in love.

Before the factory had been established a year it had to be enlarged. Soon after its capacity was increased Mr. Bellwether took a trip to New York. After he had closed a deal with a large commission house for the handling of a large part of the production of the factory he visited upper Broadway. He had been absent less than four years, but there had been some great changes. Landmarks had disappeared, new hotels had sprung up, the centre of life and gaiety had moved half a mile northward, a new crop of people seemed to have come to New York. Bellwether saw only strange faces in resorts where once he knew everybody. He was startled once when a man came forward and greeted him with a "Well, if this isn't old Billy Bellwether! Where in the world did you drop from?"

There were more of the old-timers left than Bellwether realized, but they had been crowded into the rear by the newcomers.

Bellwether did not find Broadway so alluring as in former days. The shows did not interest him as much as before, and the caravansaries did not seem the same. He did not know it, but he and not Broadway had changed the most. He felt no regrets when he left New York the next day. Possibly the fact that he soon was to be married had something to do with it. No one he saw on stage, on street or in splendid hotels in New York had half the charm for him that the girl in that West Virginia town possessed.

It is more than ten years since Bellwether married. He comes to New York occasionally now, for his business demands his presence here at intervals. His business progress has been amazing. That modest factory which he started has grown and grown and grown. To-day it occupies a ground space 580 feet by 210 and is five stories high. It employs 1,800 operatives. The grade of goods manufactured has been raised steadily. Now only silk goods are made. The Bellwether plant is one of the largest in that line in America.

As if he was not making enough money oult of socks, a clever man suggested to Bellwether a few years ago that there was a fine opportunity to make profit by manufacturing silk gloves. Mr. Bellwether was impressed, and put a considerable amount of money into such an enterprise. Its success was more astonishing even than that of the socks concern, for the very next season silk gloves became a craze, and have remained so ever since, owing largely to the introducing of the shield to the finger tips that makes the glove reasonably durable. The glove concern made 300 per cent. profit its first year.

Strange man is William Bellwether. The last time he was in New York he had such of his old cronies as he could gather to dinner with him. He was as exquisite in dress and manner as ever. The gray in his hair lends an added air of distinction to him. But he was not the same Bellwether. They all felt that.

After he had departed—very early, indeed, for Broadway, but late for the present-day Bellwether—one of the party blurted out: "Well, what do you think of him? He says he can't bear to be out of bed after 10 o'clock. And he has an income of $175,000 a year. He never had thought of a dollar in the old days, but he was telling me to-day that he has purchased thousands of acres of land somewhere in that God-forsaken country he lives in, and he has brought a forester over from Germany to take care of it. He has been putting out from 300,000 to 500,000 trees a year, spruce, white pine and the like, that mature in twenty or twenty-five years. He intends to plant from 3,000,000 to 5,000,000 before he stops. The land has been selected because it is distant from a railroad and the danger from fire is minimized. Now, why do you suppose he is doing this? He tells me he has made provision and has set aside the money to have this work carried on to completion so that in case his boys develop the same streak of folly that he displayed in his salad days, and blow in all the money he leaves them, they'll have a new fortune in this forest awaiting them when they come to their senses." (Copyright, 1911, by Richard Spillane.)